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DOI:

[10.1080/02684527.2019.1573537](https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1573537)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Gioe, D. V., Goodman, M. S., & Frey, D. S. (2019). Unforgiven: Russian Intelligence Vengeance as Political Theater and Strategic Messaging. *Intelligence & National Security*, 34(4), 561-575.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1573537>

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Unforgiven: Russian Intelligence Vengeance as Political Theater And Strategic Messaging

DAVID V. GIOE, MICHAEL S. GOODMAN, AND DAVID S. FREY¹

ABSTRACT

The March 2018 poisoning of former Russian military intelligence officer and MI6 agent Sergei Skripal again highlights the enduring Russian ardor for poisoning perceived enemies of the state as a warning to others who contemplate disloyalty. Beyond treating the event itself, we explore Russian conceptions of theatrical murder as a peculiar element of state power. We historicize this development and inquire whether assassination as political theater and strategic messaging is a tool embraced in particular by Vladimir Putin or rather emblematic of the Russian state, to the extent that there is any discernable difference between the two in the context of an autocracy. Further, we explore why and how Putin opted to strike at the moment he did to seek vengeance against Skripal. We suggest that a confluence of structural and human factors at the intersection of British government policies with Russian domestic politics led Putin to his decision. We conclude with discussion of the implications of these findings for western governments.

Introduction: A Spy becomes a Tsar

In Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film adaption of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, crime boss Michael Corleone anticipates an assassination plot by long-time trusted family insider Salvatore Tessio. Michael turns the tables first and Tessio realizes he has been revealed as the traitor. Understanding the gravity of his situation, Tessio plaintively asks family consigliere Tom Hagan, "Can you get me off the hook for old time's sake?" Hagan shakes his head, "I can't do it, Sal." Both Hagan and Tessio know that there is only one punishment for an insider betraying an organization that one served loyally for decades—execution. If Michael Corleone were to

¹ This analysis is theirs alone and does not represent the position of their employers or any government.

forgive Tessio's double cross, or even give him a reprieve from his death sentence, members of the family crime syndicate may doubt Michael's toughness and resolve, perhaps inviting others to contemplate betrayal as well. Michael retains his grip on power and achieves subordinate loyalty through a savvy combination of instilling fear and commanding respect. He may take no joy in Tessio's execution, but he has no choice. Such is the foundation upon which all that the Corleone family has built rests.

Like Corleone, Russian President Vladimir Putin presides over a mafia state in which power intermingles with corruption, kleptocracy, and extrajudicial murder, which is not limited to former intelligence turncoats, but also includes the assassination of investigative journalists and political rivals.¹ For instance, one of Putin's most outspoken opponents, liberal politician Boris Nemtsov, was murdered in February 2015 on a Moscow bridge visible from the Kremlin, shot six times in the back.² It is true that Nemtsov was never a trusted insider in the same way a Russian intelligence officer would be, but Putin can tolerate no unpunished disloyalty, for one instance of leniency has the potential to unwind all that he has built—a crack that could inexorably lead to an earthquake. Given Putin's professional background as an intelligence officer, betrayal of Russia by its intelligence officers is a particularly odious offence meriting not just death, but symbolic assassination and suggests one reason why Nemtsov might have been expeditiously dispatched with bullets, but Skripal, and Alexander Litvinenko before him, was made to theatrically suffer. In fact, these acts are characterized by gratuitous suffering and imbued with strong political messages and to former collaborators: wherever you reside, I can reach you.

This Russian prioritization of theatrical revenge, even at the expense of large-scale diplomatic reprisals and biting economic sanctions, reveals both the nature of the regime and its

leader who is contemporaneously a product and a driver of the Russian state. The dearth of intelligence-driven scholarly literature regarding the enduring Russian ardor for theatrical vengeance as strategic messaging—and conducted by its intelligence organs—has serious implications for western intelligence and security services that need to improve capabilities for protecting defectors in perpetuity and for the British government to properly resource traditional counterintelligence and security efforts against state-based threats.³

A “Wet Job” in view of the Magna Carta

On 4 March 2018, former Russian military intelligence officer and British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, also known as MI6) spy Sergei Skripal, long publicly derided as a “traitor” and “scumbag” by Vladimir Putin, and Skripal’s daughter Yulia, became victims of Putin’s vengeful long arm. Found unresponsive on a park bench in the sleepy English city of Salisbury, notably home of perhaps the best-preserved copy of the Magna Carta, the pair was poisoned with Novichok, a family of nerve agents known to be in the Russian inventory.⁴ British Prime Minister Theresa May said it was “highly likely” that Russia was the culprit.⁵ Then, just nine days later, Russian businessman Nikolai Glushkov died in an “unexplained” manner according to British police, who took nothing for granted because of Glushkov’s association with Putin critics. The following day, May retaliated by expelling 23 Russian diplomats and Western and Russian foreign ministries have escalated tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions to rarely before seen levels.⁶

Since the attack more has become known about Skripal’s background and involvement with British intelligence. According to *The Times* journalist Ben Macintyre, he was allegedly recruited by Britain’s foreign intelligence organisation, the SIS, in 1995 following a tip-off on

his potential willingness to cooperate from Spanish intelligence. An SIS officer, acting as the partner to a Spanish businessman, successfully recruited him while he was stationed in Spain. The SIS gave Skripal the codenamed *Forthwith* and over a ten-year period he regularly provided a stream of reliable intelligence.

As a member of Russian military intelligence, the GRU, Skripal had access to a wide variety of information, including the GRU's telephone directory, the structure of the GRU as well as details on its staff, and the true identities of scores of Russian intelligence officers.⁷ SIS paid for his information; even after his retirement from the military he continued to provide the British with snippets of intelligence that he gleaned from former colleagues. His espionage activities were apparently discovered after a member of the Spanish security service passed his identity to the Russians. He was subsequently arrested and convicted of treason in 2004 but was exchanged in a high-profile spy swap in 2010, after which he relocated to the UK. He settled in the south of England and kept a relatively low profile, but was not in hiding, until his recent poisoning. According to SIS sources cited by Macintyre, he was "one of the most productive spies of the post-Cold War period," suggesting that the information Skripal provided went far beyond internal telephone books and organization charts.⁸

Putin as Standard-bearer, not Pioneer

Although much hard evidence on some details is still lacking – and will likely remain so given the challenges of securing written records of Putin's reign – we approach this exploration through an analysis of patterns of Russian behavior that predate Putin, but through which we can identify Putin as the standard bearer, if not the pioneer. Indeed, Moscow has a long history of murdering perceived enemies of the state in far off places. Russianists from Hélène Carrère

d'Encausse to Amy Knight have persuasively demonstrated how ingrained political assassination has been in Russian History.⁹ Those cooperating with the West, especially in the realm of intelligence, have been targeted for assassination in particular, and some historical context is necessary. Even before the US entered the Second World War, Soviet intelligence officers Ignace Reiss and Walter Krivitsky defected (denouncing Josef Stalin and backing Leon Trotsky). Both were tracked down and executed. Reiss was killed in 1937 in Switzerland only weeks after he penned a letter to Josef Stalin announcing his defection. The Soviets originally planned to poison Reiss with strychnine in a box of chocolates, but when that did not work he was executed in a manner reminiscent of Michael Corleone's hot-headed older brother Sonny—lured to a roadside ambush, his body was riddled with bullets, including five in his head as a grisly exclamation point.¹⁰

Leon Trotsky himself was famously murdered with an ice pick in Mexico in 1940, although the novelty of an ice pick has been over-interpreted. In this case the selection of an ice pick as a murder weapon probably had more to do with availability and concealment versus gruesome theater, but the underlying vengeance was as real as the corpse. Stalin's agents did a slightly better job setting the stage in executing erstwhile intelligence officer Krivitsky, who was found dead in his hotel room in Washington, D.C., in February of 1941, in a scene that was supposed to look like a suicide, including three suicide notes just in case anyone were to doubt he had killed himself.¹¹

While political assassinations became less common during the decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, with the rise of Vladimir Putin they took on a new meaning and significance, indicating that theatrical murder, while consistent with historical precedent, must also be interpreted beyond the state. Western scholars and journalists have reported on leaked secret

Kremlin directives dating from the 1990s and 2000s authorizing the elimination of individuals deemed “enemies of the state” and residing outside Russia.¹² In 2006 the Upper Chamber of the Russian Parliament (Federation Council) passed legislation allowing the President to unilaterally and without prior consultation approve the extra-judicial killing abroad of anyone deemed an “extremist.” In addition, the definition of an extremist was expanded to accommodate “those causing mass disturbances, committing hooliganism or acts of vandalism,” as well as anyone who undermined the Russian government.¹³ One of the first victims of Putin’s vengeance was the former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Alexander Litvinenko, whose death, according to the official British inquiry, was “probably” approved by Putin personally.¹⁴

The British official inquiry did not have to look very hard to arrive at the conclusion that Putin was personally responsible for sanctioning revenge murder. He has not hidden his willingness to engage in “wet affairs” [*mokroye delo*]; indeed, that would be self-defeating, especially as interpreted for a domestic audience. Tonia Samsonova of Echo of Moscow Radio has speculated that he wants the deaths of those who betray him to be noticed, overt messages to always toe the line aimed squarely at other oligarchs or government officials, particularly of intelligence operatives, who dream of retirement in the West.¹⁵ When asked about specific killings, Putin routinely evades such questions as deftly as a talented spy evades surveillance. But when speaking in general terms, Putin has been clear. Globalsecurity.org and numerous other sources quote the Russian leader as having made some variation of the Mafioso-like threat that translates to “traitors will kick the bucket, trust me” after the very same spy exchange in 2010 that permitted Skripal to move to England.¹⁶ It is thus facile to assess that Putin would conflate permitting a spy exchange with forgiveness. This confusion nearly cost Sergei and Yulia Skripal their lives.

A Time to Betray, and a Time to Seek Revenge

A broader view of international events and certain political considerations and policy factors in British government helps explain why the Kremlin chose to act in early 2018. First, since the turn of the Millennium the British Security Service (MI5) has had to pull resources away from traditional state-based counterintelligence threats (such as Russia) to focus on radical Islamists. 2017 saw deadly attacks at the Manchester Arena, Westminster Bridge, and Borough Market in London. Moreover, while those attacks were “successful,” MI5 claims to have thwarted nine attacks during the same time frame. This offers a glimpse as to the magnitude of the threat, reinforced by the fact that MI5 spends 82 percent of its efforts on counter-terrorism (equating to 64 percent of its overall budget), according to the public report of the British Intelligence and Security Committee.¹⁷ The report further noted that MI5 was spending a mere 18 percent of its overall budget on “hostile state activity,” a category which includes counter-espionage, counter-proliferation, and protective security.

Even with this lopsided resource distribution, after the 2017 attacks by radical Islamists it became known that while MI5 was aware of the perpetrators, hard choices about resource allocation meant that the agency could not support continuous physical surveillance of the terrorists.¹⁸ Russian intelligence likely extrapolated from the public airing of MI5’s budget limitations that its agents had greater freedom of action (and freedom from surveillance) than in previous years. This would have permitted Russian intelligence to start the careful process of planning for Skripal’s exotic demise, beginning with identifying his daily routines, with some level of comfort that British physical surveillance would not be extensive and was unlikely to

prevent the operation – although it could be largely recreated after the fact using Britain’s ubiquitous CCTV cameras.

Second, Putin, like most other international observers, may have calculated that the Brexit negotiations over Britain’s exit from the European Union were not advancing in Britain’s favor. Putin may have interpreted this British economic vulnerability to mean that the penalty for murdering critics in the UK likely would be minimal. Any British financial response would require support from London’s banking center, which, in the (potential) throes of international banks and corporations moving away from London due to Brexit, would be loath to sanction sanctions. Illustrative of this hesitancy to turn away Russian money, even in better pre-Brexit financial times, was made clear in 2014. Then British Deputy National Security Advisor Hugh Powell was openly carrying official papers outside 10 Downing Street that were photographed by the media. Powell’s uncovered document stated Britain will “not support, for now, trade sanctions...or close London's financial centre to Russians.”¹⁹ Putin may understandably have reasoned that if invading Ukraine and annexing Crimea -- part of a sovereign European country – a would not invite any significant military, diplomatic, or economic response from Whitehall, surely a dead spy or two would not merit substantial retaliation. After all, in the aftermath of the assassination of Litvinenko in 2006, Prime Minister David Cameron’s muted response was to expel a few Russian diplomats.

Given the July 2018 indictments of Russians by the Mueller investigation in the United States, which may have been obtained through use of information supplied by spies within the Russian government, the attempt to murder Skripal could have been meant a pre-emptive warning to future turncoats: do not dare.²⁰ Messages “written” on the bodies of perceived traitors to mother Russia have been delivered in the US before. In late 2015, former Putin advisor

Mikhail Lesin died of “blunt force injuries” in a Washington, D.C. hotel, according to the medical report, which noted trauma to his “neck, torso, upper extremities and lower extremities.” Surely there is no reason to bruise a victim’s extremities, especially the legs, during a murder, but whoever gave the order to assassinate Lesin must have hoped that such a painful experience would send the right message to anyone who may dare to cross Putin, or the state – to the extent two can be usefully separated.²¹

Domestically, Putin could have been adjusting the complex balance of oligarchs and *siloviki*, Russian military and security officials, communicating to his more hard-line supporters that he will brook no dissent and still has his hand firmly on the levers of power. Indeed, as Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin would recall, Soviet and Russian leaders since Stalin have risked much when weakness is perceived domestically, especially by the military and intelligence apparatus. On the other hand, Russian assassinations have taken various forms that are intended for broad public consumption as gruesome political theater. They are sadly too numerous to recount here, but two are representative: While Russian journalist and human rights advocate Anna Politkovskaya was shot in an apparent contract killing on 7 October 2006 –also Vladimir Putin’s birthday—in her Moscow apartment building, Ivan Safronov, a Russian journalist critical of Russia’s military died after falling from a 5th floor window in Moscow the following year. These mysterious and terrible deaths may simply be a reminder to the general public about the reach of the state. The attempted assassination of Skripal, just prior to Russia’s hosting of the World Cup, may have been a reminder to residents of Russia to behave while Putin enjoyed the world stage.

Putin Chooses his Weapon

Perceived enemies of the Russian state, like the Soviet Union before it, have met their ends in many ways.²² While being pushed out of windows, hanged, or bludgeoned are terrifying ways to die, the Russian fascination with assassination by poison endures. Poison is appealing for a few reasons. First, it is quiet and can be done in the open. It would be suitable for a sleepy city in Salisbury, as in the case of Skripal, or London hotel tea, as in the case of Litvinenko. It can give the assassin time to depart the scene before his deed becomes known. In this sense, poison is preferred for both tactical and strategic reasons because it is tactically suitable for discreet murder yet laced with strategic messaging. Tactically, poison can be administered in plain sight and the victim does not have to be present at the same time and place, thus favouring the attacker's escape arrangements by permitting the assassin to depart the area in advance of any symptoms shown by the victim. It also enhances flexibility when selecting the right time. One cannot pull a gun and shoot someone over tea in a London hotel unnoticed, but Polonium-210 in a cup of tea would be suitable. Likewise, one cannot expect a clean getaway after shooting a pedestrian on Waterloo Bridge, but a ricin-tipped umbrella would suffice. Finally, shots ringing out or a home break-in would raise eyebrows in sleepy Salisbury, but a silent poison would accomplish the task.

Second, the victim suffers, often publicly, yielding poison's grim strategic effect. The photographs of Alexander Litvinenko, hairless, gaunt, suffering in his hospital bed grimly underscores the intended message for anyone who might consider following in their footsteps and cooperating with a Western intelligence service. This may be one reason why no photographs of Skripal lying in hospital or any specifics as to his condition have emerged, as graphic evidence of Novichok's gruesome effects would amplify the strategic message of the poisoning—something British authorities would seek to avoid.

Finally, any thug can murder with a gun or blunt force the head. Soviet and subsequently Russian leaders have taken assassination to a dramatic art form, wishing to separate themselves from thieves, loan sharks, and the underground. The use of military grade exotic poisons shows that assassinations are not *mano-a-mano*, but rather brings the full power of the state to bear against an individual, framing the situation as hopeless and futile. In 2013 exiled Russian oligarch and Putin enemy Boris Berezovsky was found hanged in his London home. Berezovsky used to observe with prophetic gallows humor that his security guard “was not a bodyguard; he’s a witness.”²³ Poison does not always kill but arguably this does not matter if the effect is demonstrable or disabling. For example, consider the enduring disfigurement as happened to former Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, who defeated the Kremlin’s man in the 2004 Presidential race. Although Yushchenko survived and made a physical recovery, his face is forever scarred from military grade dioxin poisoning, a permanent reminder of the penalty when challenging not just an autocrat, but also a state.

With respect to the most recent assassination attempt on British soil, former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson stated, the “use of this nerve agent would represent the first use of nerve agents on the continent of Europe since the Second World War.”²⁴ That is true as far as it goes, but the focus on the precise type and category of poison employed obscures the more problematic issue of defectors and dissidents—many of whom having provided significant service to Her Majesty’s Government—being killed in Britain with exotic and theatrical means. Further, language such as “first use,” while technically accurate, de-historicizes the problem of dead Russians in Britain by focusing on the type of lethal agent and would therefore neglect not only the Litvinenko assassination but also the 1978 murder of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov on Waterloo Bridge with ricin.²⁵ Although Polonium-210 is a radioactive element and

ricin is a toxin and therefore not a nerve agent in the family of Novichok, focusing on the specific poison obscures the pressing historical precedent given the various exotic ways in which Russians have been poisoned in Britain since Markov's murder.

Although the murders of Markov, Litvinenko, and the attempt on Skripal set a pattern, Russian poison innovation and development have proceeded apace, each attempt more complicated and scientifically demanding than the last. Indeed, Novichok is different, not only scientifically but also symbolically. It is a family of agents rather than a specific variant, though it is often used as a catchall term for them. Developed in the waning days of the Cold War and even then, within the offensive FOLIANT nerve agent program conducted by the Soviet government, it was held to be in a class of its own. As a binary chemical weapon its separate elements are not, in themselves, dangerous. Yet once its harmless precursors are mixed it becomes, according to its creators, one of the most potent nerve agents ever created.²⁶ The consensus view of experts is that it can only be created by a state given the facilities, resources, and expertise required to provide it.

Novichok's characteristics are fairly well known in the West as one its main creators, Vil Mirzayanov, fled to the US in the early 1990s while Boris Yeltsin was President of Russia.²⁷ Novichok exists in solid form, as a thick paste, in powder form, as well as in gas and liquid forms. Indeed, recent reporting indicates that the assassin may have employed a liquid form of the agent because a resident of nearby Amesbury died of exposure to it after believing it was a perfume. Apparently, her boyfriend had found what looked to be an expensive bottle of fragrance simply discarded.²⁸ Although antidotes exist, as Mirzayanov confided, while they might prevent anyone exposed from dying, they would likely be "an invalid for the rest of their life."²⁹

In practical terms, exposure would be “almost instantaneous.” Once the chemicals entered the bloodstream, Skripal would have had muscle spasms, his pupils would have shrunk, and he would have had difficulty breathing. In fact, there is one documented case of a previous attack using Novichok, which reveals something of its utter ruthlessness. In 1995, Russian businessman Ivan Kivilidi and his secretary both died. The assassin had coated Kivilidi’s telephone with Novichok and, following his exposure, the banker fell into a coma and died from kidney failure. His secretary took ill from simply dusting his office; she had not touched the telephone. The perpetrator also became sick but managed to disclose that he had purchased the Novichok from a member of the Russian State Scientific Research Institute of Organic Chemistry and Technology.³⁰

From released information by the British government and via media sources there are several elements to assigning responsibility as to who the perpetrator was behind the attack. The most obvious is that it can only have been created by a state, and there is ample evidence that the Russians have previously stockpiled it. But to complement the physical and chemical evidence from the attack itself is additional intelligence, quite separate to what happened. British intelligence briefings provided to allied countries have included some information on the remote Russian factory behind the manufacture of Novichok. At the plant it has been reported that stockpiles are “far smaller that would be used as a battlefield weapon,” thereby “suggesting their use in targeted killings.”³¹ One former member of Russian intelligence suggested that it is “too dirty” to be used casually and so the only implication is that it was designed to garner attention and remind would-be defectors of the terrifying arsenal that could be brought against them.³²

The characteristics of the poison and the optics of its use help the Russians thread the needle of evidentiary and legal culpability versus messaging. On the one hand, Novichok is like

a signature, a silver bullet with an engraving making it abundantly clear that the source is Russia. On the other hand, it allows for plausible deniability by the Kremlin, which can feign offense at the accusations and mendaciously demand scientific evidence.³³ This stance allows the Kremlin to send messages of obvious responsibility and impunity to its domestic audience and those it views as traitors. The ease of “getting away with it” allows Putin to project strength, disdain for Western democracy and traditions of justice, and an unlimited sense of Russian power at the strategic level. At the same time, the Kremlin claims to be playing by the West’s respect for evidence and rule of law, it is thumbing its nose at those traditions. In the case of Salisbury, Russia disingenuously offered to “assist” with the investigation, while at the same time dispatching agents and launching cyberattacks to tamper with the Swiss Speiz laboratory testing Novichok and other chemical weapons samples.

Recalling the case of Litvinenko, once British authorities discovered his assassin, ex-KGB officer Andrei Lugovoy, they called for his extradition from Russia for trial. Obviously, there was no expectation that Putin would comply, but with theatrical flair Putin instead awarded him a medal for “services to the motherland.”³⁴ At the tactical level, the idea of “getting away with it” holds only until the Russian operatives are back on Russian soil, from whence they would never be extradited. There were traces of Polonium-210 at various points in London, permitting the subsequent inquest into Litvinenko’s death to make a reasonable claim of Lugovoy’s responsibility, but the chance that Putin would ever give up a loyal fellow KGB veteran to the West is impossible. For Putin, it does seem loyalty is a two-way street.³⁵

Much like the Russians meddling into the 2016 American presidential election, a little obfuscation goes a long way. As in the election, Kremlin spokesmen and diplomats have denied the allegations in the Salisbury case, no matter how credible the evidence. They also asked for

more proof from their accusers and even lob counter-assertions that the nerve agent was of British origin.³⁶ Had the assassins been caught red-handed and sentenced to prison in Britain, that might have been a public relations defeat for Putin, but once his henchmen are back in Russia, he can taunt his victims, as his press secretaries ask the Russian equivalent of “who could be guilty of such an exquisite and well-planned crime?” Still, the Russian operatives only escaped punishment in a manner of speaking. Instead of occupying a British holding cell awaiting trial, they are safe in Russia, but it is likely that they will never travel beyond Russia’s sphere of influence again. Indeed, fellow Kremlin assassin Lugovoy has not left Russia since his role in Litvinenko’s death in 2006 for fear of an international arrest warrant.

Technology married with dogged gumshoes—both official and of the fourth estate—following the trail cracked open the case. Ubiquitous British CCTV and video surveillance cameras caught the pair of assassins at various stops on their morbid journey starting with their arrival at London’s Gatwick airport, to their east London hotel, and then picking them up again at the train station and on public streets in Salisbury. After months of detective work and thousands of hours of pouring over CCTV footage, British authorities identified the perpetrators as Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov. Petrov was subsequently identified by the investigative website Bellingcat as Dr. Alexander Mishkin, a GRU physician, and Boshirov was revealed to be Anatoliy Chepiga, a highly decorated GRU colonel.³⁷ The public identification of assailants took a farcical turn when (before their real names emerged) they agreed to a television interview with Russia’s state-funded RT (formerly known as Russia Today) under the aliases that they used to travel to Salisbury. The interview was plausibly described by British authorities as “risible” and indeed the comical cover story (and selling of that cover story) would not have

passed muster for a Boy Scout's merit badge in covert travel.³⁸ While this particular farce surely backfired, other Russian efforts in the information environment have hit closer to their marks.

The Cyber and Information Warfare Dimension

In the early weeks after Skripal's poisoning, it became obvious that Russia was behind the attack. In response, Russian internet trolls took to social media with a now familiar aim: to sow doubt and confusion as well as make people question what they clearly saw. The trolls latched onto an online Twitter poll established by a vocal British critic of Prime Minister May. The poll asked users whether May "has supplied enough evidence for us to be able to confidently point the finger of blame towards Russia?" An overwhelming majority voted "no", but subsequent analysis by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) concluded that pro-Kremlin bots were responsible for most of the influential retweets, funneled through other international platforms on both the left and right, such the Facebook account of Italian nationalist Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and the Ron Paul Institute on the right, and the German party Die Linke on the left.³⁹ A senior DFRLab associate explained, this was "an attempt by pro-Russian users to influence the online poll, and thus to create the appearance of greater hostility towards the UK government than UK users themselves showed."⁴⁰ This attack and a larger disinformation campaign, an exposé in the *Washington Post* concluded, was likely organized by or associated with the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) in St. Petersburg, the same troll farm indicted by Robert Mueller's prosecutorial team.⁴¹ Although the initial poll seemed authentic, the IRA successfully capitalized on an organic critique to manipulate the results and mislead or misrepresent the British public's view as a result.

The Russian full court press went far beyond Twitter polls. It involved television, Facebook, YouTube, and even traditional media, and demonstrated the Kremlin's reliance on its information warriors to pull its former little green men out of the fire. The campaign, in which Russian outlets disseminated at least 46 false stories and conspiracy theories, successfully overwhelmed fact-based reporting by mainstream outlets.⁴² Not only was there a deluge of disinformation, but social media engagement statistics demonstrated that the falsehoods attracted additional users and gained ground from the Kremlin perspective. In terms of digital volume, by early April 2018, nearly 90 percent of Facebook posts with the term "Skripal" either originated from Russian state-owned accounts or were associated with a pro-Kremlin narrative. And these posts were shared with vigor. According to Donara Barojan of the DFRLab, "a review of the most-shared articles on social media suggested that content from Kremlin-owned and pro-Kremlin media outlets far outranked mainstream and independent media on audience engagement statistics."⁴³

Between the 2016 American presidential election, the British Brexit vote, and the Skripal poisoning (just to name a few), Russia's 4D strategy of distract, dismiss, distort, dismay has been impressively successful. The trolls at the IRA, the producers at RT, and Russian politicians themselves, among others, have amply proven that they can create appealing content for those who are of a mind to believe it, and to sow seeds of doubt even among critical information consumers. The head of RT, Margarita Simoyan, has gone as far as publicly stating that "there is no such thing as objective reporting," while Russian politicians and diplomats have brazenly recirculated false stories they themselves concocted.⁴⁴ This traction and broad diffusion that these campaigns of confusion have been able to achieve in otherwise advanced and educated

societies is both a credit to the Russians' mastery of the craft of information warfare, or at least the narratives about it, as well as alarming for the future of western civic engagement.

Yet, Russia's cyber and information warriors were not only in reaction mode after the assassin's sloppy tradecraft ultimately led to their unmasking. In fact, British authorities claim that the GRU's cyber specialists hacked several email accounts associated with Yulia Skripal as a means of keeping tabs on their ultimate target.⁴⁵ The implication is that Russian intelligence is not only using disinformation to cover their tracks, but hacking and cyber operations were part of the planning process from the time that Russian leaders selected the elder Skripal for assassination.

Putin's Domestic Political Signalling

The Russian message, and signals of its vast cyber operation, are omnipresent, and purposely so. It has been alleged that there are many former Russian SIS agents, "at least a dozen more," living in the UK.⁴⁶ The threats against them are neither veiled nor surprising to those agents.⁴⁷ If people like Skripal, whom evidence suggests was aware his life was in jeopardy and had contacted police to express his fears, had any doubts, Russian state TV Channel One was happy to allay them.⁴⁸ Channel One in Russia warned:

Don't choose England as a place to live. Whatever the reasons, whether you're a professional traitor to the motherland or you just hate your country in your spare time, I repeat, no matter, don't move to England...Something is not right there. Maybe it's the climate. But in recent years there have been too many strange incidents with a grave outcome. People get hanged, poisoned, they die in helicopter crashes and fall out of windows in industrial quantities.⁴⁹

Hardly subtle. In fact, leaving this sort of "calling card," like Novichok itself ensures that the message is received beyond the victim.

The Russian message to intelligence defectors, critical journalists, and rival oligarchs is crystal clear: Choose your team carefully, and ask yourself, can it protect you in perpetuity? Torture and torturous death communicates that Russian power is ubiquitous and that there is no statute of limitations on betrayal. Because one is traded to the West in a spy swap, as in the case of Skripal, does not mean the betrayal is forgiven or forgotten, or that the traitor is safe. In 2010 Putin wanted his deep cover “illegal” intelligence operatives back from the US, where they had been arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and made the deal with American and British authorities.⁵⁰ That was an act of pragmatic calculation, not forgiveness. There is no “water under the bridge” in this worldview, and bygones are certainly not that. For Putin, whether Skripal resided on the Avon or the Moskva was immaterial. The time was right to carry out his sentence, as the motto of Stalin’s wartime military counterintelligence directorate SMERSH commanded: “Death to Spies!”

Putin’s International Signalling

Beyond overtly signalling would-be traitors and Russia’s domestic audience, the Kremlin’s poisoning of Skripal’s communicates three critical messages to the West as well. First, assassinations are, for Putin as they have been for dictators from Mussolini to Stalin to the Shah to Kim Jong-Un, a necessary and legitimate performance in the theater of power. Although the bare-shirt horseback riding, Judo-practising, animal-wrestling Putin may have little more to offer Russia than the image of strength, he has capitalized on it. His recent political campaign posters offered the following equation: “Strong President—Strong Russia.” The impunity the Kremlin’s killers seem to enjoy further bolsters Putin’s image as a man whose power is inevitable and unstoppable, a global force. Martial strength has brought some measure of domestic support and

grudging international recognition. This makes assassinations worth the diplomatic and/or economic costs, provided they remain at historically perfunctory tit-for-tat levels. Indeed, the coordinated response to the attempted murder of Skripal may change this calculation, although it seems unlikely, even after the coordinated expulsion of some 150 Russian diplomats and spies worldwide. Still, Putin's willingness to transcend the rules while claiming he does nothing of the sort, whether in Salisbury or Syria, provides him with more diplomatic heft than he feels he would lose should the West further sanction Russia. He fully understands that his power rests on intimidating rivals, dissidents, and critics, and true intimidation requires demonstrating that he can execute his opponents whenever he wishes. Showing restraint would be a sign of weakness, the fateful first crack in the edifice of his authoritarian regime.

Second, assassinations further efface the division between leader and state and complement Putin's leader/state conflation effectively. Betrayal of one is betrayal of the other. Here again Putin draws from the well-worn playbook of autocrats and dictators, for whom appropriation of Louis XIV's famous statement "I am the State", rather than "I am the leader of a state", is *de rigueur*. Any threat against Putin thus becomes an existential one for Russia, and existential threats must be destroyed by any means necessary.

The logic becomes circular. If the threats were not significant, they would not require people to die. But since enemies keep dying, they must represent a grave threat to Russia. The equation of leader and state also helps explain the nature of Russian denials to the West. These denials may insist that there is no proof that Russians carried out assassinations or interfered in elections, but there is never denial of Western conclusions that if those actions were carried out, they had to be done so with orders from Putin. Putin thus benefits from Western reports that nothing happens in Russia without his permission or knowledge. Fake news or not, reports that

Skripal or others wrote to Putin to ask forgiveness likewise are central to the narrative of Putin's power.⁵¹ These accounts cement perceptions, both domestically and globally, of his domination of the state, his absolute power, and even his ability to determine what constitutes the truth. This correlation of "Putin as Russia" establishes strict limits. Deviation is thus easy to spot and betrayal far worse than simply turning on an individual or institution.

Third, the West must appreciate that Putin's identity will always be that of a professional intelligence officer. Those intelligence officials that betray the GRU, like Skripal, or the FSB, like Litvinenko, have done more than offend the state; they have betrayed Putin's understanding of the sacred loyalty owed by an intelligence officer to the state. Intelligence professionals are entrusted with the state's deepest secrets and betrayal of that trust requires revenge, no matter the time or distance removed. Further, Putin's training as a Soviet-era intelligence officer imparted a worldview not just of communism, but of loathing for and competition with the West. The goal of Soviet intelligence—destruction of the Western democratic order—remains prominent in Putin's mind.⁵² Brutal assassinations are a particularly terrifying way to demonstrate the weakness of the West to Westerners, and its unsuitability for Russia.

Conclusion: Calibrating a Western Response

This article has explored some key factors and reasons why Putin uses his intelligence services to undertake theatrical political violence—notably poisons—under what conditions, the timing of their use, and the strategic messaging to both domestic and global audiences as a result. We have argued that poisons are both revenge and a signature warning, especially for those who have occupied and then betrayed a position of confidence in Russia's intelligence and security apparatus. We have further noted the adroit incorporation of information warfare and cyber

dimensions for both offensive operations (locating Skripal) as well as defensive operations to twist the public narrative to distract audiences, distort the truth, and sow discord and suspicion in Western public and government discourse.

However, to calculate any meaningful response Western governments must first understand what Putin's actions and methods are not. They are not a litmus test for the international community, nor are they a barometer to measure the potential Western repercussions for further military adventures in the Russian near abroad. They alone do not signal either a hardening of Russian support for allies such as Bashar al-Assad. Neither are political assassinations a proxy for other geostrategic moves the Kremlin might wish to make. They should be taken on their own terms, and taken seriously, but without over-interpretation that would lead to policy confusion.

To counter the Kremlin, the West must demonstrate both strength and resolve, but it must also understand that political murder, like intelligence collection, cyber operations, and information warfare, are levers of Russian state power and unlikely to be abandoned whatever the price. Still, costs can be imposed to signal moral outrage and force Putin to use this tactic more sparingly. The coordinated diplomatic expulsions of scores of Russians across the globe, many of whom were likely to be intelligence officers, has a short-term and useful effect on the ability of the FSB to operate abroad, but its impact will only be limited.

Additionally, the West must show that it can protect the Russian intelligence officers who have boldly confronted the Russian security apparatus and left Russia alive. Occasional diplomatic expulsions or economic sanctions will not deter Putin from targeting defectors, who can be better protected once resettled in the West. This is a resource question and MI5 should devote greater resources to protect those that SIS has brought in from the cold.

Beyond specific responses to assassination, in general the West must act decisively and defend its principles. This would include, as Parliament's Foreign Affairs committee has already concluded, moral leadership from Westminster to the London business community to forgo Russian investment and travel permissions, making it harder for Putin's oligarch power base to convert ill-gotten rubles into dollars, euros, and pounds sterling, to spend grandiose sums at Harrods, or to cruise the streets of London in exotic Italian sports cars.⁵³ Finally, the British government could identify other Russian media and messaging outlets as information operations efforts and shut down some of Putin's powerful disinformation and propaganda tools. This would of course necessitate further engagement in an already testy relationship between the Home Office and Silicon Valley, but Putin's trolls are clearly one of his most effective weapons, turning social media platforms into metaphorical battlefields where citizens of the West hack each other to pieces at the IRA's and RT's urging.

If the responses are minor and piecemeal, from Putin's perspective, it would be better for the Russian Embassy in London to close down and for Moscow to forfeit diplomatic relations with the UK than for one traitor on British soil to escape "judgment." However, if the EU, US, and other like-minded allies act in concert and enact long-term punishments, such as described in this section, as signs are indicating they might, then perhaps Putin might be persuaded. Even that, however, seems improbable, but he could be checked to a greater degree. Lack of diplomatic dialogue is not an existential threat to Putin's power. However, betrayal from deep inside a kleptocratic security state, just like betrayal of the Corleone family, is. Forcing Putin to reconsider his methods, international priorities, and depriving him of powerful information warfare tools would, like New York's five mafia families agreed in *The Godfather*, help keep the peace.

¹ For a treatment of the rise (and potential fall) of Putin's "tsar-like regime" see Judah, *Fragile Empire*. For the decline of Russian democracy in comparative global context see Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," and for consideration of authoritarian developments in the post-Cold War communist space see Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.

² For a discussion of whether Putin personally ordered Nemtsov's assassination see Satter, "Who Killed Boris Nemtsov?" and Amy Knight, *Orders to Kill*, 257-82.

³ There are several notable exceptions that do account for the intelligence dimension of the Soviet and subsequently Russian search for security, such as Andrew, *The Sword and the Shield* and Andrew, *KGB: The Inside Story*. However, much of the scholarly literature on the Soviet then Russian state's engagement abroad approaches the issue from nuclear dimension as well as military strategy, economic, and diplomatic considerations with particular emphasis on the Cold War and its nonviolent resolution.

⁴ There is insufficient public evidence to assess whether Yulia Skripal was specifically targeted to join her father in suffering for his crimes against Russian military intelligence, if she was coldly calculated to be collateral damage, or if, in fact, her poisoning was an accident in the operation.

⁵ This view was supported by the findings of the independent Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons report. See <https://www.opcw.org/special-sections/salisbury-incident/>

⁶ Since then the EU and a host of other countries have publicly and vocally supported the British position and contention that the Russian state was behind the attack. A large number of expulsions have taken place, both of Russian diplomats based overseas and comparable numbers of foreign diplomats based in Russia.

⁷ Russian Federation military intelligence service: GRU (*Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye*), now also known as GU.

⁸ This detail is from Macintyre, "Sergei Skripal".

⁹ Carrère d'Encausse, *The Russia Syndrome*; Knight, *Orders to Kill*.

¹⁰ Andrew, *Sword and the Shield*, 78-79.

¹¹ Hyde, "Still Perplexed About Krivitsky," 428-441.

¹² E.g. Garham, "Russia 'gave agents license to kill' enemies of the state,".

¹³ "Russia Law on Killing 'Extremists' Abroad,"

¹⁴ "President Putin 'probably' approved Litvinenko murder,"

¹⁵ Samsonova, quoted in Humphreys, "The devilish art of assassination. Why Russia eliminates its enemies with dramatic flair." Although owned by Gazprom, Echo of Moscow Radio's journalists have also been victimized by assassination attempts, most infamously the stabbing of Tatiana Felgenhauer in October 2017.

¹⁶ "Mokroye Delo (wet affairs)."

¹⁷ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament. *Intelligence and Security Committee Annual Report 2016-7*, 9, 49. These are, of course, the efforts devoted within the UK to countering state-originated espionage. In addition, it should be noted that 66% of SIS' budget and just under 50% of GCHQ's budget are allocated to countering hostile state activity, though this effort is concentrated overseas. According to the more limited Parliamentary analysis, even despite the Skripal affair, the allocation of effort of MI5 devoted to "hostile state action" declined to 15%. Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament report, *Intelligence and Security Committee Annual Report 2017-8*, 18

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Watt, "UK seeking to ensure Russia sanctions do not harm City of London." Notably, this 2014 event was before the 2016 Brexit referendum, but it is clear that the UK has a recent history of welcoming Russian money without too many questions about the provenance of substantial sums. At the end of 2016, the British government estimated that Russian investors held £25.5bn in British assets, and had parked another £68bn in British offshore satellites. Articles and reports on dirty Russian money abound, e.g. Foreign Affairs Committee, *Moscow's Gold: Russian Corruption in the UK*; Applebaum, "One reason Putin treats us with disdain"; and Bullough, "How Britain let Russia hide its dirty money."

²⁰ Skripal allegedly had contacts with Michael Steele, the former British intelligence officer and author of the Steele Dossier. See Kanter, "The ex-Kremlin spy apparently poisoned in Britain has links to the man who wrote the explosive Trump-Russia dossier."

²¹ The redacted version of the coroner's report can be found on the FBI's website at FBI Records: The Vault – Mikhail Lesin, part 1 of 1.

²² See, e.g., Oleson, "Stalin's Disciple," 19, 21-25.

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- ²³ Barry, "As Putin's Opponents Flocked to London, His Spies Followed."
- ²⁴ The full speech can be found at Johnson, "Foreign Secretary's remarks on the use of a nerve agent in Salisbury."
- ²⁵ Even 40 years hence the Markov case is not clear. See Nehring, "Umbrella or pen?", 47-58.
- ²⁶ Chai, et. al., "Novichok agents," 45-48.
- ²⁷ See also Mirzayanov, *State Secrets*. Not only has Western intelligence known about Novichok for several decades, there is also documentary evidence that concerns over its continued existence have been raised in official circles. Informal discussions of like-minded states, concerned about the proliferation and control of chemical weapons, have been meeting since the 1980s. Known as the Australia Group, the UK is a prominent and often vocal member.
- ²⁸ Schwirtz and Schmitt, "Novichok Was in a Perfume Bottle."
- ²⁹ Barry and Yeginsu, "The Nerve Agent Too Deadly To Use."
- ³⁰ Details from "And the poison followed him."
- ³¹ Philp, "Salisbury poison 'made at Russia's Porton Down'."
- ³² Snegovaya, "Why did Russia poison one of its ex-spies in Britain?"
- ³³ Lewis, "Salisbury, Novichok, and International Law," 12, 18.
- ³⁴ Harding, "Russian honour for Andrei Lugovoi is provocation, Litvinenko inquiry told."
- ³⁵ Sir Robert Owen (Chairman), *The Litvinenko Inquiry*, esp. 192-97, 227.
- ³⁶ Dearden, "Salisbury attack."
- ³⁷ Bellingcat Investigation Team, "Full report: Skripal Poisoning Suspect Dr. Alexander Mishkin, Hero of Russia."
- ³⁸ Roth and Dodd, "Salisbury novichok suspects say they were only visiting cathedral."
- ³⁹ On 29 March 2018, Deputy Italian Prime Minister Matteo Salvini shared an article on his Facebook page entitled, "The Skripal Case is a hoax, the war of the West against Russia is terribly true," posting that it was "very interesting." He earned 3,400 "likes" and it was shared 842 times. The post is still publicly viewable in early 2019 at Salvini, <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10155663618083155>. A recent book by Anton Shekhovtsov describes Salvini's party as "a Russian front organization in Italy." Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, 141.
- ⁴⁰ As quoted in Dixon, "Russian trolls attempted to manipulate view of Salisbury poisoning."
- ⁴¹ Warrick and Troianovski, "Agents of doubt."
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ Barojan, "#PutinAtWar: Social Media Surge on Skripal." See also Barojan, "#PutinAtWar: Kremlin Narratives on Skripal Continue to Grow Online."
- ⁴⁴ Simoyan, quoted in Lisitsina, "Putin's media strategy?" See also Warrick and Troianovski, "Agents of doubt." Warrick and Troianovski claim the Kremlin controls all of Russian television.
- ⁴⁵ Rayner and Maidment, "Russia hacked Yulia Skripal's emails."
- ⁴⁶ Macintyre, "Sergei Skripal."
- ⁴⁷ "Sergei Skripal, Russian Spying and Echoes of the Cold War," minutes 4:01-5:08.
- ⁴⁸ Mendick, et. al., "Russian spy fighting for life after being 'poisoned'."
- ⁴⁹ Bennetts, "Russian State TV warns 'traitors' not to settle in England."
- ⁵⁰ For an analysis of the illegals case see Lefebvre and Porteous, "The Russian 10 ... 11, 447-466.
- ⁵¹ Coulter, "Kremlin denies poisoned Russian double agent Sergei Skripal wrote to Vladimir Putin for pardon."
- ⁵² Nina Khrushcheva, quoted in Wright, "Putin, a Little Man Still Trying to Prove His Bigness."
- ⁵³ Foreign Affairs Committee. *Moscow's Gold*, conclusion sections 71-75.